

# A jewel to treasure

BY MILAN VEGO

**P**rofessional military education (PME) has played a major role in preparing military institutions for war. Solid basic, intermediate and senior-level PME combined with combat training is an indispensable element for success in a war. It is also the foundation of professionalism of an officer corps.

The true value of PME is difficult to properly evaluate because it contains many unquantifiable or hard-to-quantify elements. Some influential voices have argued that the service academies and colleges should be shut down because they are too expensive and do not compare with their civilian counterparts. In these critics' view, this would help trim the federal budget and also improve the military. These ideas are not only wrong; they defy common sense. Enormous damage will be done to our military and national security if such ideas are accepted.

## **SERVICE ACADEMIES VS. ROTC**

Traditionally, the U.S. service academies are the most prestigious undergraduate military educational institutions. Yet the number of officers commissioned by service academies is generally small, some 20 percent of the total number. For example, West Point provides only 20 percent of Army second lieutenants. In contrast, ROTC graduates constitute about 56 percent of the Army's active-duty officers, 11 percent of Marine Corps officers, some 20 percent of Navy officers, and 41 percent of Air Force officers — a combined 39 percent of all service active-duty officers.

Service academies are highly regarded because of their academic excellence. U.S. service academies are among the best academic institutions in the country. West Point provides some 60 percent of Army officers with hard science degrees. Its graduates include two American presidents and numerous scientists and politicians. West Point also produced 83 Rhodes scholars, bested only by Harvard, Yale and Princeton.

Critics acknowledge that service academies provide excel-

lent academic credentials, but contend that service academies are unnecessary because such education can be obtained at civilian colleges and universities at much lower cost. They say future officers should be sent to academically more rigorous civilian institutions on full scholarship and then, on graduation, receive military education at a short-term military school.

Yet service academies cannot be compared with civilian colleges and universities because their functions are very different. Each service simply must have at its very core a relatively small number of highly educated and motivated officers who fully embody its traditions, culture and way of warfare. Only service academies can produce such officers, not ROTC, Officer Candidate School or direct commissioning. The main prerequisite for success is a corps of cadets with diverse backgrounds and experiences. Selection of candidates for service academies should be based solely on merit. This means that there should be full equal opportunity regardless of race or gender or religion, but not equal outcomes.

One of the main values of service academies is their ability to attract talented high school students to serve in the military. Service academies are an excellent place to socialize young men and women to adopt the culture of their new service. Academies instill the camaraderie and sense of integrity and honor through the strict cadet/midshipman honor code. In general, the graduates of service academies are much better able to handle the rigors of modern military life and combat because they are subjected to strict military discipline during their entire stay at an academy. Their lives as cadets are replete with strict and diverse academic and athletic requirements. They have to internalize the importance and value of perseverance, integrity and selfless service.

In contrast, ROTC cadets attend military classes only a few times a week and then live their normal civilian lives. ROTC programs, no matter how successful, do not have as high academic

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standards. Graduates of service academies also have a support network that helps them in the early stages of their career.

The main argument of proponents for abolishing service academies seems to be their high cost compared with the costs of ROTC programs. Supposedly, the education of a cadet at a service academy costs \$300,000 over four years, while the education costs for an ROTC cadet are estimated at \$130,000. However, operating costs for all of West Point and its 4,500 cadets are \$168 million. This means that the cost of educating a cadet is \$37,333 per year, or roughly \$150,000 for four years of education. According to other sources, the cost for commissioning an officer at West Point is \$202,000, or roughly the same as for education of a student graduating from an Ivy League university.

But even if abolishing service academies resulted in significant savings, one has to ask whether this would be worth the price of losing the professional ethos and quality of the officer corps in general. The value of these intangibles cannot be expressed in terms of dollars saved.

Some critics point out that not all faculty members at service academies have doctorates. However, doctoral degrees are more appropriate for the faculty of service colleges, not for service academies. It is far more important to have a combat-seasoned officer with an advanced degree teaching cadets than a civilian with a doctorate. These instructors command greater credibility because of their military education, especially if they have combat experience. For example, at West Point about 50 percent of instructors are rotating active-duty officers. However, all instructors have advanced degrees. At the Naval Academy, introductory and naval science subjects are taught by officers with advanced degrees while professors with doctorates teach higher courses. Although civilian universities might have a higher proportion of faculty with doctorates, it does not necessarily mean that the education provided is superior to that of the service academies. Very often, graduate assistants do the teaching; many professors do not show up in class. Too many faculties ease demands on students so that they get good numbers at the end of the terms to keep their jobs. In contrast, standards at the service academies are generally higher and more strictly adhered to. Another major problem at many civilian universities is limitations on freedom of speech, or "political correctness." This often severely impacts the academic freedom of teachers and students. When academic freedom is denied, an educational institution cannot prosper academically.

If service academies were abolished, future officers also would not be educated in military history. Solid knowledge and understanding of military history is indispensable for the success of staff officers and commanders. Of 150 colleges and universities that offer a doctoral degree in history, only a dozen offer full-fledged military history programs.

Service academies are not just service-oriented undergraduate institutions. They also serve important diplomatic functions that strengthen ties with foreign militaries. All academies have exchange programs with foreign militaries. This is an important tool for strengthening relations with allied military and developing relations with other friendly countries.

### WAR COLLEGES

The quality of academic education at U.S. war colleges is generally high. Most of them award master's degrees. One of the greatest strengths of education at service colleges is that the students have the opportunity, many of them for the first time, to actively interact both in the classroom and their private time with their peers from other services. This has a highly beneficial effect on their understanding of the culture, traditions and thinking of sister services. In many cases, friendships are forged that enhance the understanding and cooperation in the joint employment of U.S. forces. This intangible element cannot be replicated at any civilian college or university. Instructors at war colleges are active-duty officers and civilians with advanced and doctoral degrees. Many civilian instructors are retired officers. In 2004, at the Air War College, 25 percent of instructors had prior military services, while at the Army War College some 60 percent of instructors had such experience. A civilian faculty with military background brings the advantage of familiarity with military issues and organizations. They are also more comfortable in the PME environment. Of course, civilian professors are generally much better instructors on strategy and policy or force planning. However, they generally lack the knowledge and understanding of the military decision-making process and operational planning, in particular. Only a few civilian professors can properly teach military theory and operational warfare.

One of the major arguments by critics is that civilian universities would open the minds of military officers to a broader range of issues than they encounter at service colleges. Their assumptions would be challenged in the open instead of having their institutional biases reinforced. Future high commanders would interact with future diplomats, politicians and

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**Newly commissioned second lieutenants toss their hats as the Air Force Thunderbirds fly over Falcon Stadium during the 2009 U.S. Air Force Academy graduation.**

executives. Such views betray ignorance of the educational climate at U.S. service colleges, where each seminar is composed of students from all services and civil service agencies (State Department, Defense Intelligence Agency, CIA, etc.) plus foreign officers. Hence, the seminar setup ensures lively discussion and disparate views on many subjects. Instructors routinely challenge students to think “out of the box.” Students can offer many perspectives and political preferences. Student seminars are designed to ensure breadth of perspective. In fact, the U.S. military is much more open to brainstorming, critique and counterproposals than are civilian colleges and universities, where political correctness runs amok.

In his Washington Post op-ed calling for the service colleges to be shut down, Thomas Ricks used Gen. David Petraeus as an example of a senior commander whose success can be

partly attributed to his doctoral degree in international relations at Princeton University. Ricks conveniently forgot to mention that Petraeus is also a 1974 graduate of West Point and was the top graduate of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College class of 1983. No one can doubt that Petraeus’ education at Princeton and fellowship at Georgetown University were highly beneficial in the performance of his subsequent duties in Bosnia and Iraq. Yet successful operational commanders are also products of their professional military education, personality and character, and combat experience. They must have a broad knowledge of foreign policy, diplomacy, geopolitics, the international economy, ethnicity, religions and other issues that shape the situation in a given theater. They should have a deep knowledge of other countries’ history, society and culture. Such a knowledge and understanding can be acquired by self-education throughout one’s career and through frequent travels overseas. Fluency in, or even working knowledge of, foreign languages is a definite advantage for a future operational commander.

More important factors for success, however, are the commander’s will, determination, moral courage, judgment and wisdom. A doctoral degree in international relations can be highly useful for the operational commander to acquire a perspective that includes full understanding of the interrelationship between nonmilitary and military aspects of the situation in his or her area of responsibility. But there are many examples, of operational commanders who have been highly successful although they did not have a doctoral degree or even an advanced degree. Likewise, there were many commanders who were highly educated, but failed as operational commanders.

Another major negative impact of abolishing service colleges would be the effect on education of future operational commanders and staff officers in military theory and operational art. Teaching of the capabilities of U.S. forces, service/joint doctrine, operational planning and war gaming would be reduced to a history lesson. Abolishing service colleges would deliver an enormous blow to PME. For all practical purposes, the U.S. officer corps would be deprofessionalized. No U.S. civilian college could possibly replace service colleges in teaching these critically important subjects. One of the main objectives of PME at intermediate and especially senior levels is to educate future commanders and staff officers in all

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aspects of the theory and practice of operational warfare — a component of military art concerned with the theory and practice of planning, preparing, conducting and sustaining major operations and campaigns aimed at accomplishing operational or strategic objectives in a given theater. Contrary to what some believe, service colleges do not produce strategists; they produce operational artists. There is big difference between the two. Yet that does not mean that policy and strategy should not be taught at service colleges. Operational commanders and planners must have a keen understanding of the relationship between strategy and policy, on one hand, and operational art and strategy on the other. This includes mastering all aspects of the employment of large forces and formations to accomplish operational or strategic objectives in the theater. Success is accomplished through the weighing, judging and balancing of ends, ways and means.

A large number of future high commanders and staff officers from several

dozen countries attend U.S. intermediate- and senior-level courses at service colleges. Because most foreign countries send their best and most promising officers to U.S. war colleges, many of them reach the highest positions in their home service or the military. Some of them become highly influential political or business leaders — even presidents. Abolishing service colleges would terminate these enormously successful programs. This, in turn, would have a highly negative effect on U.S. military relations with a large number of the allied and other friendly countries. The Naval War College alone illustrates the importance of educating foreign officers at U.S. service colleges. Between 1956, when the program started, and spring 2008, about 1,700 officers graduated from the Naval Command College. Of this number, 866 reached flag rank and 200 became chiefs of their respective navies. Between 1972 and spring 2008, about 1,750 officers graduated from Naval Staff College, including 272 future flag officers and 97 chiefs of their navies.

These figures are conservative because some graduates of these programs became chiefs of their navies without reaching a flag rank (and others aren't yet senior enough for consideration.)

Shutting down service academies and colleges would harm the professionalism of the U.S. military and our national security and indirectly undermine the security of other friendly countries. Service academies are the very heart of undergraduate education in the military. The education they provide can never be equaled by any civilian university. The true value of service academies and colleges for the military is intangible; it cannot be expressed in dollar terms. While not everything is well with the quality of education at U.S. service academies and colleges, it does not follow that they should be shut down. It means that an all-out effort should be made to fix the problems and further enhance quality of all aspects of education in service academies and colleges. The military cannot outsource the education of its future leaders without fatally undermining the entire institution. **AFJ**

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information operations, often focused on civilian casualties and collateral damage from U.S. air strikes or commando raids. Adding to Taliban strengths are the corruption and inefficiency of the Afghan government. A few Taliban operatives in poorly administered government-controlled areas can exert influence way out of proportion to their size and capabilities.

Taliban weaknesses include a lack of firepower, a disastrous governing record and an absence of central unity. The Taliban and its associates — including the followers of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the Haqqani organization, al-Qaida affiliates and disaffected Pakistani extremists — fight decentralized campaigns. Indeed, individual commanders in all groups have a high degree of autonomy. They can be defeated in detail. Divide-and-conquer tactics can have a high payoff.

While the Taliban have some follow-

ing among their Pashtun co-ethnics, especially in the southern part of the country, the Taliban are hated by the Uzbeks, Tajiks, Hazarra and other non-Pashtun groups that together make up a numerical majority in Afghanistan. The memory of Taliban persecution is fresh and motivational for all the non-Pashtun groups. Wherever they have gone since 2004, the Taliban have used barbaric tactics to win the obedience of the local populations. They win "hearts and minds" by murder, violence and coercion. Nearly all opinion polls indicate very little support for the Taliban.

The Taliban can be defeated and blocked by strategies that protect the population and build up the security capacity of the Afghan state, its provinces and its districts. Counter-sanctuary activities by Pakistani forces could easily disrupt their base areas and training grounds. Better coordination with Persian Gulf allies and stronger

counternarcotics efforts could dry up their financial base. To win faster, we will have to fight harder and smarter, drastically increasing Afghanistan's capacity to manage its own affairs. The truth is that Taliban forces have made great strides, but they can be stopped. The Taliban cannot win unless the West quits.

A third myth comes from a misinterpretation of Afghan history: Afghanistan has always been unstable and has never had an effective central government. Trying to build one is a waste of time and resources.

From the early 1900s to the Soviet invasion in 1978, Afghanistan was a poor, but relatively stable, developing country. The government writ large — national, provincial, district and at local levels — was in control at home and generally at peace with its neighbors. In the postwar era, the country was court-

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